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SUBJECT: NATIONAL POLITICAL REFORM CONFERENCE ENDS. NOW
WHAT?

REF: LAGOS 1073

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Unable to reach consensus on key issues of resource control, presidential term limits, and whether former military leaders should be precluded from contesting future elections, the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) ended deliberations July 12. Conference chairmen plan to present to President Obasanjo the majority and minority positions for his consideration. Most observers expect the President to forward the Conference's recommendations to the National Assembly. What the National Assembly will do with the findings is unclear, particularly since the Assembly opposed the convening of the conference in the first place, believing it an usurpation of its prerogatives. Had NPRC delegates backed what many believe to have been the President's "real agenda"--banning of military leaders and a single six-year term for the presidency, of which he would be the first beneficiary--we might have been able to expect Obasanjo to lobby the National Assembly to adopt the conference's conclusions. However, since the verdict was mixed on these issues, the NPRC final report may end up relegated to a bottom shelf. For now, South-South delegates remain cautiously optimistic that the National Assembly will approve some measure of increase in the percentage of oil revenues that are channeled back to their communities. End Summary.

NPRC Sputters, Stalls, Then Dies

¶12. (U) Per reftel, NPRC Chairman Justice Niki Tobi was forced to recess the confab on June 14 when delegates from three of the six geographical zones represented walked out. The conference leadership postponed reconvening the confab three times in an effort to give closed-door negotiations the opportunity to bear fruit. However, these negotiations ultimately proved unsuccessful and on July 12 the leadership announced the end of deliberations. We still anticipate a plenary closing session in the near future; though it is unclear whether all delegates will attend.

¶13. (U) To recap, delegates differed on how much the federal allocation to the oil producing states should be increased. The maximalist South-South position was for an increase to 50 percent from the prevailing rate of 13 percent. The minimalist position was an increase to 25 percent with provisions for graduated increases later. The confab, however, adopted an "elder's committee" recommendation to increase the derivation to 17 percent, with no future dispensations. There is considerable controversy as to whether this was indeed the consensus reached by the elders committee. NPRC chairman Tobi subsequently told the press that he was "misinformed" when he called for adoption of the 17 percent proposal.

¶14. (SBU) The proposal to ban former military leaders from contesting public office also proved controversial. On May 9, the committee studying this issue, put forth its recommendation that leaders who came to power through coups d'etat should be ineligible to stand for public office. A few days later, the committee's chairman, Joseph Wayas, was attacked by unknown gunmen, but escaped unharmed. Wayas' office was also vandalized. This recommendation would eliminate presidential contenders Babangida and Buhari. The majority of delegates backed this position. However, a significant minority argued that "democratic norms" mitigated against banning individuals.

¶15. (U) Lastly, delegates were unable to agree on presidential term limits and the rotation of power among the six geographical zones. In the end, the status quo of four-year tenures for a maximum of two terms was preserved. However, like the resource control issue, it is unclear whether that represents the true consensus position, particularly since at the time it was adopted, one geographical zone had already walked out the conference.

Now What?

16. (SBU) Most observers anticipate that the conference's chairmen will present both majority and minority positions to President Obasanjo for his consideration. The president has intimated in the press that he will forward the conference's recommendations to the National Assembly. What the National Assembly will do with the findings remains unclear at this point. A few senators have, however, pointedly recalled that the Assembly strongly opposed the convening the confab and had therefore refused to appropriate funds for it, compelling the President to finance it from "private sources."

17. (SBU) The South-South remains cautiously optimistic that in the end the resource allocation will be increased from the prevailing 13 percent to a figure ranging between 17-20 percent. Delegates from this zone predict that President Obasanjo will endorse 20 percent as a compromise position, appeasing at least somewhat, both the North and the South. They are less sanguine about the National Assembly's approval, but believe they have a reasonable chance of success.

Comment

18. (C) Faced with agitation since he came to power in 1999 to organize a Sovereign National Conference (SNC), Obasanjo likely intended for the confab to divert this pressure and to derail the SNC that was being planned by the civil society group PRONACO (Pro-National Conference). (Note: PRONACO is still moving forward to convene a SNC in October. End Note). The NRPC was also intended to assuage calls from different ethnic groups for greater political participation and fiscal federalism. Lastly, presidential critics insist that it was also the vehicle by which Obasanjo hoped to exclude his rivals and secure an extension of term or new mandate. The president has denied these allegations.

19. (C) In many ways, conference delegates proved the president's critics wrong. Despite the virulent protests at the conference's inception concerning delegates' "hand-selection" and the president's proscribed "no-go" zones, confab members exhibited considerable independence. They refused to endorse what they believed to be Obasanjo's "real agenda," and instead seriously debated issues of import to the future governing of the body politic.

10. (C) The convening of the confab served as a release valve when the President was under significant pressure to hold an SNC and address core issues of resource control, power-sharing, and adequate political participation by all ethnic groups. However, rather than mending these rifts, the conference only trained a harsh light upon them. The good news of debt relief and the Supreme Court's decision in the president's favor mitigated the immediate impact of the NRPC's collapse. However, the issues discussed at the confab will not disappear. As the euphoria of the past few weeks recedes, we can expect them to return front and center.

CAMPBELL